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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Monday, August 4, 1941

Subject: "TO DRY OR NOT TO DRY." Information from the plant specialists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Bulletin available, Farmers' Bulletin 984-F, Farm and Home Drying of Fruits and Vegetables.

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Drying is an old-fashioned way of preserving fruits and vegetables, and many homemakers are reviving it in connection with our national food-for-defense program. But drying is not adapted to all that grows in the garden. For a great many foods, plant specialists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture say canning is preferable to drying. And some foods can be simply stored in basements or pits, or in frozen storage.

But where drying is suitable, there are certain advantages. Dried products have less weight and bulk than the fresh material, so they take up much less space in the storage pantry. Some dried products can be stored without being hermetically sealed,-- a saving in labor. And the cost of a home-made drier is generally less than the cost of canning equipment and containers.

Before you plan to do any drying, you might send to the U. S. Department of Agriculture for Farmers' Bulletin 984, Farm and Home Drying of Fruits and Vegetables. With this manual in hand you can learn which products are not satisfactory for drying, and why. And how to prepare and dry the different fruits and vegetables which are suitable; how to sulphur those that need sulphuring. The bulletin also tells how to handle products after drying them so that they will store well, and how to make a practical home-made drier.

Apples, pears, peaches, apricots, berries, prunes, plums, and figs

all dry well. Cherries dry well, too, but are about over now. Among the vegetables, sweet corn, beans and peas are the best driers, but the bulletin also tells how to dry pumpkins and squash, cabbage, onions, sweetpotatoes and celery.

You realize, of course, that dried products, when ready to serve, will taste different from canned products, just as canned products taste different from fresh. But they are very good if carefully prepared for the table, and if you handle them properly during the drying they retain considerable food value.

One important part of drying is to draw out the moisture as rapidly as possible. You do this by applying heat or by blowing air over the products, or by combining the two methods, using an electric fan to carry off moisture-filled air. Rapid drying stops the physical and chemical changes in fruits and vegetables. Those changes affect the natural color and flavor, and often change the natural sugars and proteins or produce new and undesirable flavors.

Each fruit and vegetable has its own requirements in drying, and up to the present time the U.S. Department of Agriculture has not worked all of these out in detail. That's why you won't find every product you might want to dry, mentioned in the drying bulletin. A number of the fruits are improved in color and flavor and in keeping qualities by being sulphured before they are dried, for example, and you can learn how to do this from the bulletin. Practically all vegetables require "blanching" before drying, and the bulletin explains this process, too.

In a few parts of the country that have almost rainless weather, high

temperatures, low humidity, and a great deal of sunshine, you can dry a number of products in the open air. You protect them, of course, from dust and insects. But everywhere else, it is better to dry with artificial heat. For the ordinary home, where only a few pounds of material are dried at one time, you can make a cookstove drier to set on the top of the kitchen range or over a heating stove. Then you let the drying go on while you are busy with other household work.

Such a drier usually has about 8 wire netting trays set into a light framework. A convenient sized drier fits the top of the stove in width and depth and stands about 27 inches above the stove. You make the framework so that there are supports for the trays, so you can slide them in and out like drawers, without disturbing other trays. The sides and top of the drier are covered over to keep the heat inside, except for a space about 3 inches wide all around the top of the drier. This space is covered with wire netting like the trays, so the moist air which rises to the top of the drier will pass out quickly. You cover the drier with any thin light lumber as you can get from packing boxes, or with wooden pulpboard, or with tin or light galvanized iron. When you use metal you avoid danger of fire.

The main points to remember in building a drier are to make the walls, top and door as nearly airtight as possible, so that the warm air from the range or stove will flow directly through the material you are drying; and to make the trays easy to get in and out or to change from one position to another to even up the drying process.

But you can get complete directions for making a drier, with all dimensions given, from the free government bulletin we mentioned before. Write to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for Farmers' Bulletin 984-F, Farm and Home Drying of Fruits and Vegetables.

